DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 480 099 CG 032 557

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TITLE	Sources of School Belonging for Students with Learning Disabilities.
PUB DATE	2003-08-00
NOTE	12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Psychological Association (111th, Toronto, ON, Canada, August 7-10, 2003).
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Environment; *Learning Disabilities; Mental Health; *Middle School Students; *Peer Acceptance; Peer Relationship; Psychological Patterns; Self Concept; *Social Support Groups; *Student Adjustment

ABSTRACT

A sense of school belonging has been theorized to be crucial to a child's positive school adjustment and may contribute to their future mental health. The present study investigated the relationship between sources of social support as measured by Harter's Social Support Scale for Children and Goodenow's Psychological Sense of School Membership. The sample was composed of 52 middle school age students with learning disabilities and a matched sample of nondisabled classmates. Further analysis examined the relationship between belonging and background variables and self-perception. Possible group differences were described and the implications for school change offered. (Contains 15 references and 3 tables.) (Author)

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Running Head: SOCIAL SUPPORT AND SCHOOL BELONGING

ED 480 099

Sources of School Belonging for Students with Learning Disabilities

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Poster Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada, August, 2003.

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ABSTRACT

A sense of school belonging has been theorized to be crucial to a child's positive school adjustment and may contribute to their future mental health. The present study investigated the relationship between sources of social support as measured by Harter's Social Support Scale for Children and Goodenow's Psychological Sense of School Membership. The sample was composed of 52 middle school age students with learning disabilities and a matched sample of nondisabled classmates. Further analysis examined the relationship between school belonging and background variables and self-perception. Possible group differences were described and the implications for school changed offered.

Social-emotional support from birth is thought to be important for healthy development and a positive sense of well being. During the transitional period of early adolescence, the evolving relationship between parents and their early adolescents lead to diminished parental support (Steinberg, 1990). The parent-child relationship may be subjected to increased stress, resulting from more frequent bickering, heightened tension, and fewer shared. Early adolescents' pull away from the more comfortable close supervision of children to achieve a new level of independence, eventually leading to an altered parent-child relationship (Steinberg, 1990). Parents report greater distance from their early teenagers, as they now turn increasingly to friends to share self-doubts, personal concerns, and private confidences (Salvin-Williams & Berndt, 1990).

Along with changes at home, there are changes in school. Early adolescents move from the more protective elementary school to middle or junior high schools. With the change in school a variety of challenges are presented, including higher academic demands, more impersonal teaching methods, and less satisfactory relations with teachers (Eccles & Midgley, 1990; Epstein & McPartland, 1978). The social ecology of a middle school is a more challenging, complex, and confusing place.

Students with learning disabilities (LD) in particular may be more vulnerable to these school changes. Yet, despite their vulnerability, lower grades and more problematic behavioral adjustment students with LD have been found to achieve a sense of school belonging similar to that of students without LD (NLD) (Hagborg, 2001). This study sought to further investigate the pathway of school

belonging development among both LD and NLD youth. In particular, this study will explore sources of perceived social support, self-perception, and its relationship to school belonging for students with LD and NLD students.

Method

Participates

The sample was composed of 52 middle school students with LD by a single school psychologist using consecutive regular assessments over a three year period. These students were matched one for one with NLD students from the same school by grade and gender. Students provided self report rating pertaining to their Grade Point Average (1 – Fs to 9 – As) and Homework Time (i.e. minutes per night).

Measures

Social Support. The Social Support Scale for Children (SSS) is a 24-item measure developed by Harter (1985a) to assess the perceived support and regard accorded by four different sources of support: parents, classmates, teachers, and close friends.

Self-Perception. The Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC) is a 36-item measure developed by Harter (1985b) to assess student perceptions of five major personal domains. For the purposes of this students only Scholastic Competence and Global Self-Worth were used.

School Belonging. The Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM) developed by Goodenow (1993) was administered. This student used an addreviated version of the scale, the PSSM-Brief (Hagborg, 1998).

Results & Discussion

The groups were compared on background variables (see Table 1). The NLD students reported both more time higher grades ($t(102) = 3.55$, $p < .001$) and more time on homework ($t(102) = 102$, $p < .01$).

A comparison between the two groups on each of the measures found that NLD students reported a more favorable Scholastic Competence ($t(102) = 3.23$, $p < .01$) and a lower scores on the PSSM-Brief ($t(102) = 3.63$, $p < .001$). The groups did not differ on Global Self-Worth or any of the four subscales of the SSS.

To assist in understanding the relationship between school belonging and self-perception and social support, Pearson correlations were computed. For students with LD, school belonging as measured by the PSSM-Brief was significantly associated with grade level, both domains of self-concept, and all four subscales of the SSS. For the NLD group, the PSSM-Brief was significantly associated with none of the background variables, Global Self-Worth, and three of the four subscales of the SSS.

Pertaining to the association between SSS and PSSM-Brief findings. The LD sample's correlations were notably higher for each subscale except teacher support, while for NLD students teacher support was strongly associated with school belonging, and much less the other subscales, with Close Friend Support not significantly related to school belonging. These findings are unexpected. It was suspected that teacher support, especially special education teacher support, would be crucial to student with LD achieving adequate school belonging.

This investigation has found that both students with and without a LD reported an equivalent level of social support from parents, teachers, classmates, and closed friends. Earlier research has demonstrated the students with LD often have weaker social skills and less accepted by their peers (Gresham, & MacMillan, 1997; Hagborg 2001; Swanson, & Malone, 1992). Consequently lower social support from classmates might have been expected. Also, given their academic difficulties and associated behavioral difficulties (Gresham, & MacMillan, 1997; Hagborg 2001) lower teacher support would seem likely, yet this again was not found. However, the correctional findings suggest that school belonging for students with LD is more closely tied to parental support and peer support than is the case for their NLD classmates. For the NLD students, teacher support more related to school belonging. It seems likely that for students with LD, with their substantial academic weaknesses and need for support, they have learn to be less invested in teacher social support, which may be less forthcoming. Instead, support from parents and teachers is more important for them to achieve a adequate sense of school belonging.

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Table 1

A Comparison of Students with LD and NLD students on Background Information

	LD		NLD		
	M	SD	M	SD	t-test
Age	12.28	1.40	11.90	1.35	1.43
Grade level	6.54	1.14	6.54	1.14	.00
Grade Point Ave.	6.66	1.30	7.58	1.30	3.55***
Homework Time	39.66	30.11	60.11	42.48	2.92**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2

A Comparison of Students with LD and NLD students on SPPC, SSS, and PSSM-Brief

	LD		NLD		
	M	SD	M	SD	t-test
SPPC					
Scholastic Competence	2.57	.71	3.00	.63	3.23**
Global Self-Worth	3.12	.60	3.22	.69	.44
SSS					
Parental Support	20.27	3.31	20.79	2.99	.84
Classmate Support	18.84	3.72	18.01	3.39	1.19
Teacher Support	17.73	3.89	18.03	2.78	.46
Close Friend Support	19.58	3.79	20.02	3.39	.62
PSSM-Brief	3.93	.74	3.41	.71	3.63***

*p < .05, **p <.01, & ***p < .001

Table 3

Pearson Correlations between PSSM-Brief and Background Variables, SSS, and SPPC

	LD	NLD
	r	r
Age	-.25	-.16
Gender	.03	.08
Grade	-.30*	-.15
Homework Time	-.05	.04
Grade Point Average	.24	-.02
SPPC		
Scholastic Competence	.30*	.19
Global Self-Worth	.36**	.48***
SSS		
Parent Support	.50**	.31*
Classmate Support	.57***	.38**
Teacher Support	.35**	.57***
Close Friend Support	.37**	.15

*p < .05, **p <.01, & ***p < .001

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